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ABSTRACT

Though the media depicts U.S. youth as more criminally prone than they actually are and highlights school shootings, schools are still one of the safest places for youth to be. This policy brief adds perspective to punitive school policies (e.g., zero tolerance policies that require suspension or expulsion) in the face of stable or declining rates of youthful offending in schools. In order to compare rates of school assaults with rates of suspension and expulsion, researchers analyzed the latest available government data for both indexes. From 1976-98, nearly 95 percent of students reported they had not been injured with a weapon at or near school in the past 12 months. Despite relatively stable rates of student victimization over the 23 years, suspensions and expulsions have nearly doubled. The increase seems to have little to do with reported victimization and does not appear to have affected reported victimization markedly. Other research indicates that suspended students often find themselves bereft of any form of education. There are racial disparities in student suspensions, particularly with respect to black makes. Students suspended from school are much more likely to engage in physical fights, carry a weapon, smoke, use alcohol, marijuana and other drugs. (SM)

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SCHOOLS AND SUSPENSIONS: SELF-REPORTED CRIME AND THE GROWING USE OF SUSPENSIONS

Policy Brief

September 1, 2001

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Justice Policy Institute

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Policy Brief

Schools and Suspensions:
Self-Reported Crime and the Growing Use of Suspensions[1]

I. Introduction

In 1998, in the wake of tragic shootings in Jonesboro, Arkansas, West Paducah, Kentucky, Pearl, Mississippi and other communities, the Justice Policy Institute sought to inject some context and data analysis into the discussion of school violence. In *School House Hype: School Shootings and the Real Risks Kids Face in America(1999)*[2], JPI found that school shootings were exceedingly rare and not on the increase. In School House Hype, we reported that 99% of the times a youth is killed in America, it is outside of a school and that youth were 40 times as likely to be killed outside of a school than inside one. As it turned out, a few highly-publicized school shootings notwithstanding, schools were and are one of the safest places for young people to be in America.

In *School House Hype: Two Years Later (2000)*[3], the Justice Policy Institute found that there was a stark disconnect between public perceptions of youth crime, inside and outside of schools, and actual youth crime rates. For example, while there was a 68% decline in homicides by youth from 1993 – 1999, 62% of Americans believed that youth crime was on the increase in 1999.[4] Although there was less than a one in 2 million chance of being killed in one of America's schools in 1999, 71% of respondents to a *NBC/Wall Street Journal* poll believed that a school shooting was likely in their community.

In *Off Balance: Youth, Race, and Crime in the News*[5], the Berkeley Media Studies Group and the Justice Policy Institute were commissioned by the *Building Blocks for Youth* Initiative to examine the media's coverage of youth crime. The public is highly reliant on the news media to inform them about crime, but we found that the news media are presenting a skewed picture of youth crime in its daily coverage. Three quarters (76%) of the public report that they form their opinions about crime based on what they see or read in the news.[6] Youth are unduly associated with crime and violence in the news. One study of local California TV coverage found that nearly 7 in 10 news stories on violence involved youth, while youth arrests made up only 14% of arrests for violent crime that year. Another study found that more than half of TV news stories concerning children or youth involved violence, while only 2% of young people were either victims of violence or violent offenders that year.[7]

News media coverage, America's main source of information on crime, exaggerates youth crime, depicting our young people as more criminally prone than they actually are and as committing a larger overall portion of crime than they actually do. Youth crime is down but the public, and many policy makers think it is up. And the public is far more fearful of the safety of their children in schools than homicide and overall crime rates warrant.[8]

The good news is that, negative depictions of youth crime and a frightened public notwithstanding, crime by America's youth is at its lowest level in decades. According to the FBI uniform crime reports, youth homicides are at their lowest rate since 1966, and homicides by youth under age 13 are as low as they

have been since the FBI began keeping that statistic in 1964. Likewise, the National Crime Victimization Survey, the nation's best measure of non-homicide crime, reported that, in 1998, youth crime was at its lowest rate *ever* in the survey's 25-year history.[9]

The bad news is that the good news has not yet found its way into public policy concerning our young people. Large numbers of youth are currently imprisoned with adults in America. Idiosyncratic cases of young people suspended and expelled from schools under so-called "zero tolerance" policies for bringing toe nail clippers and aspirin to school are all-to-common news items. As students, teachers, and administrators return to school this year, this short policy brief is an effort to add perspective to punitive school policies in the face of stable or declining rates of youthful offending in schools.

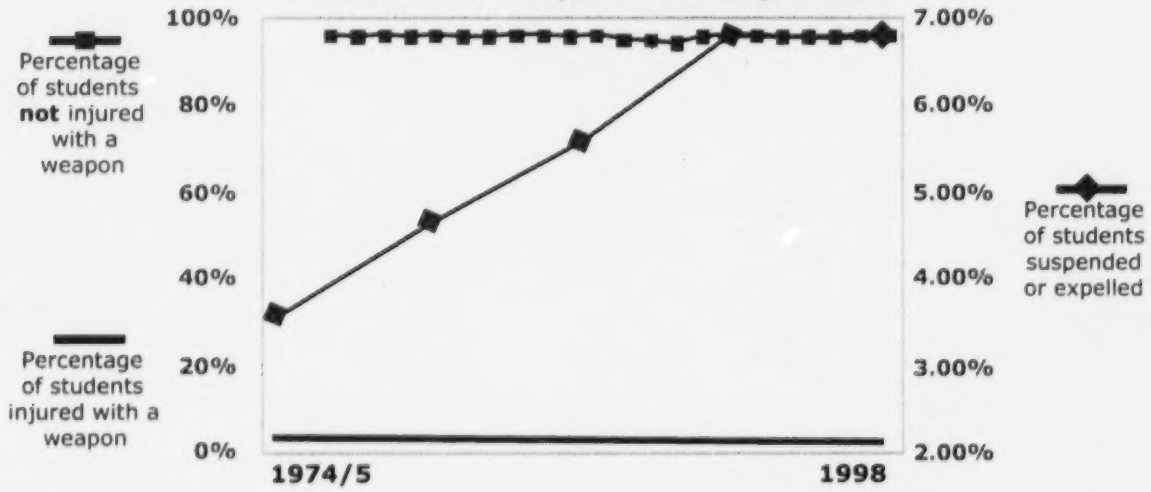
II. Methodology and Findings

In order to compare rates of school assaults with rates of suspension and expulsion, JPI analyzed the latest available government data for both indices.

Each year since 1976, researchers from the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research have conducted the *Monitoring the Future* survey for the United States Justice Department. The survey asks approximately 3,000 high school seniors annually a series of questions about the types of victimization, if any, they have experienced over the past 12 months, in or near school or on a school bus.[10]

Likewise, the Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights has data available on school expulsions and suspensions as part of its *Elementary and Secondary Schools Civil Rights Compliance Reports* ("E&S Survey") for select years dating back to 1974. Their most recent data available is 1998.[11]

Figure 1: School assaults remain stable while suspensions skyrocket



Sources: Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights - Projected Suspension Rate values for the Nation's Public Schools (2000). Johnston, Lloyd D., Bachman, G. Jerald, O'Mally, Patrick. *Monitoring the Future*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Institute for Social Research, 1977 (2000).

As Figure 1 shows, injury of students with weapons has been remarkably stable during the 23-year period covered by this analysis. From 1976 to 1998, between 94% and 95% of students indicated that they had not been injured with a weapon like a knife, gun or club at or near school in the preceding 12 months.

Table I, which compares just the 1976 data to the 1998 data over seven separate measures of victimization, yields similar results. The Class of 1998 was slightly more likely to report being injured or threatened with injury, or to have experienced property damage or theft of something worth less than $50 than the Class of 1976.

Table 1: School victimizations stable over past two decades

Type of Victimization	Class of 1976 (percentage answering "not at all")	Class of 1998 (percentage answering "not at all")
Has something of yours (worth under $50) been stolen?	**63.8%**	**60.5%**
Has something of yours (worth over $50) been stolen?	**92.2%**	**86.2%**
Has someone deliberately damaged your property (your car, clothing, etc.)?	**74.2%**	**73.4%**
Has someone injured you with a weapon (like a knife, gun or club)?	**94.3%**	**95.1%**
Has someone threatened you with a weapon, but not actually injured you?	**87.5%**	**87.6%**
Has someone injured you on purpose without using a weapon?	**86.4%**	**84.5%**
Has an unarmed person threatened you with injury, but not actually injured you?	**78.7%**	**75.2%**

Source: Johnston, Lloyd D., Bachman, G. Jerald, O'Mally, Patrick. *Monitoring the Future.* Ann Arbor, Michigan: Institute for Social Research, 1977 (2000).

Despite relatively stable rates of student victimization over the past 23 years, suspensions and expulsions have increased. Between 1974 and 1998, the rate at which America's students were suspended and expelled from schools has almost doubled from 3.7% of students in 1974 (1.7 million students suspended), to 6.8% of students in 1998 (3.2 million students suspended).

The increase in suspensions seems to have had little to do with reported victimization and does not appear to have affected reported victimization markedly. Rates of self-reported victimization in the late 1980s are remarkably similar to rates of self-reported victimization in 1998 (see Table I). *No precipitous rise in assaults is discernible which might explain why states and the Federal governments launched a wave of "zero tolerance" policies.*

III. Discussion

Despite stable rates of assaults with and without weapons in America's schools over the last two decades, suspensions and expulsions from America's schools are at record highs. This finding adds to the growing body of research that calls into question the harsh application of zero tolerance policies. What some researchers have dubbed "the mass exclusion of American children from the educational process"[12] has been criticized in previous research on several grounds:

- Suspended students often find themselves bereft of any form of education. Twenty-six states currently have no requirement to provide suspended or expelled students with alternative education.[13]

- Youth suspended from school are significantly more likely to drop out of school. One study, in the *Teachers College Record*, found that sophomores who are suspended from school drop out at three times the rate of their peers.[14]

- Students suspended from school are much more likely to engage in troublesome behavior. According to the Centers for Disease Control, "out of school" youth are significantly more likely to become involved in physical fights; carry a weapon; smoke; use alcohol, marijuana and other drugs; and engage in sexual intercourse than "in school" youth.[15]

- There are disturbing racial disparities in student suspension rates by race, specifically with respect to black male students. In school year 1974-5, 65.7% of suspended students were white, 28.7% were African American, and 5% were Hispanic. By 1998, after the total number of suspended students doubled, whites represented 51.3% of suspended students; African Americans 32. 7%; and Hispanics 14.5%. African Americans are approximately 2.6 times as likely to be suspended from schools as whites.[16] *The Condition of Education 1997*, published by the US Department of Education, found that almost 25% of all African American male students were suspended at least once over a four-year period.[17]

While this brief finds the benefits of increasing suspensions to be highly speculative, the implications of high rates of suspension and expulsion for America's young people are clearly profound. Aside from the psychological impact of suspension for trivial acts, research is finding higher rates of dropping out and delinquency amongst suspended youth along with disturbing racial disparities in the use of suspension. More generally, as young people throughout the country return to their classrooms this fall, it is important to remember that they are at least as well behaved as many of the teachers and administrators who work with them were when they were their age.

The Justice Policy Institute is a research and policymaking organization, with offices in Washington DC, and San Francisco, CA. This report was supported by generous grants from the Center on Crime, Communities and Culture, and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. The authors would like to thank Lori Dorman, DrPH, Berkeley Media Studies Group;' Michael Males, PhD., University of California, Santa Cruz and Jeffrey Butts, PhD with the Urban Institute for their review and critique of this analysis. For more information on school safety and juvenile crime statistics, please visit JPI's website at www.cjcj.org, or call (202) 737-7270.

Endnotes

1. This policy brief was prepared by Vincent Schiraldi and Jason Ziedenberg of the Justice Policy Institute. For more information on the data sources used in this survey, or previous JPI reports on school safety, visit our website at www.cjcj.org.
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